

IN MEMORIAM

WESLEY NEWELL TIFFNEY, JR.  
1940–2003

Wesley Newell Tiffney, Jr., was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, the son of Wesley Newell Tiffney, Sr. and Sarah Cousins Tiffney, both botanists. A graduate of Rivers Country Day School and Boston University, he received his Ph.D. in botany from the University of New Hampshire. His doctoral research on arctic-alpine plants and snow-cover relationships was conducted on the summit of Mount Washington in New Hampshire's Presidential Range. During his years in the White Mountains he taught public education programs in field botany for the Appalachian Mountain Club, and participated in mountain search and rescue.

In 1967, he joined the biology faculty of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and began the first summer courses, research opportunities for undergraduates, and field trips using the university's newly acquired property on Nantucket Island. In 1969, he was appointed the first and founding director of the Nantucket Field Station, a position he held for 33 years. Under his leadership, the Field Station became a year-round institution responsible for the environmental education of thousands of students, from preschool children to doctoral candidates in the sciences. He dedicated the Field Station to supporting the research, education, and conservation management initiatives of island organizations including the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, the Maria Mitchell Science Center, the Nantucket Land Council, island schools, and the Town of Nantucket. As director, he provided vital support to the Nantucket research efforts of many internationally renowned scientific institutions, including NASA, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Harvard University.

In addition to UMass—Boston's summer ecology courses, he lectured and conducted field trips for the interdisciplinary programs of the many colleges and universities using the Field Station, including Northeastern University's geology and environmental policy courses, the Rhode Island School of Design's landscape architecture seminar, and the Williams College—Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies program. A believer in interdisciplinary education, he was unusual among Field Station directors in making the facility available to students and researchers interested in the arts and in subjects related to Nantucket's human history.

His research specialties included the ecology and conservation management of heaths, and he brought scientists from as far away as Britain and The Netherlands to Nantucket to share their knowledge of the subject. He studied global warming, sea level rise, and the erosion of Nantucket's shores, and was passionate in defending the island's coast from inappropriate development and from costly, ineffective, and environmentally damaging coastal defense structures. He was also passionate about protecting Georges Bank from offshore oil development. Believing that education and science-based decision-making are more effective than political rhetoric, he brought industry, government, and academic scientists together on Nantucket in 1982 to share research results in a closed conference that helped, in part, to end plans for drilling in this environmentally sensitive area. He served many years on the board of the Harbor Fuel Corporation, and was a Vice President of the American Society for Environmental Education, the Nantucket Lifesaving Museum, and the Maria Mitchell Science Center.

A large man with a deep voice, a raunchy sense of humor, and a flair for puns and outrageous statements, he was at heart a gentle person who loved all creatures and plants. At the time of his death, he had been retired for less than a year to a new home in coastal Maine, where he was enjoying exploring the area and studying the history and ecology of the Kennebec region. He is survived by his wife of 20 years, Susan Beegel of Phippsburg, Maine; and his brother Bruce Tiffney, sister-in-law Robin Gowen Tiffney, and niece Theora, of Santa Barbara, California.